



[Frederick Douglass, 1818 - 1895](#)

Frederick Douglass

This is the first main post of our series of African Revolutionary Writers. As a rule, you will receive four instalments in each weekly part, over ten weeks, with each instalment highlighting one revolutionary writer. These are your regular political education posts for the first quarter of this year. They are clearly marked as “African Revolutionary Writers”.

We begin with a giant: Frederick Douglass.

Context

The first part of our ten-part series on African Revolutionary Writers covers the period from slavery to Imperialism. The

Atlantic slave trade begun when Portuguese ships passed Cape Bojador on the coast of present-day Western Sahara in 1434, bringing them south of the great desert for the first time.

They immediately took slaves. These, the first slaves of the bourgeoisie, were sold to Spanish colonists on the Canary Islands, where the original inhabitants (the [Guanches](#)) had already been enslaved *in situ* and worked to extinction. The triangular slave-trade pattern: Portugal – Africa – Canary Islands was soon afterwards scaled up to Britain – Africa – West Indies (or alternatively Brazil or North America). The Atlantic Trade took slaves across the ocean via the “Middle Passage” and brought sugar, tobacco, cotton and other plantation-grown commodities to Europe.

Christopher Columbus had crossed the Atlantic to the West Indies in 1492, and touched the continent of South America in 1498, the same year that Vasco da Gama reached India by the Cape sea route. By 1502 the trans-Atlantic slave trade was in full flow, first as a Portuguese monopoly, and later as a British monopoly.

Although Marx notes in “Capital” that capitalism began in the 1500s, yet for more than three centuries the dominant business of the Western European bourgeoisie was not capitalism, but the Atlantic slave trade, and the biggest operator in that business was Britain. This situation lasted until the capitalist “Industrial Revolution” of the late 1700s, also in Britain.

Only when the Western bourgeoisie made its turn towards

capitalism did it become expedient for it to allow some blacks – released slaves – to create a literary *genre* known as the “slave narrative”, as part of the capitalist campaign to suppress slavery. This was done so as to make room for a new, more productive, exploited class: the wage-slaves or working proletariat.

An early example of the “slave narrative” *genre* is the work of [Olaudah Equiano](#), who wrote a book about his “[Interesting Life](#)” as a slave and then as a rescued slave, published in 1789. Such slave-narrative books tended not only to expose the evils of slavery, but also to praise Christianity and capitalism in equal measure, in order to flatter their sponsors and readers.

Frederick Douglass took the *genre* to a new level, transcended it, and left behind an incomparable and permanent liberatory resource.

Douglass

[Frederick Douglass](#)’s work was exceptional for the breadth and the rebellious fearlessness of his rhetoric. Douglass broke free from the limits of the slave narrative *genre* so as to begin to create a truly revolutionary black literature. This is why our series begins with him.

After escaping by train from twenty years of slavery, Douglass wrote an extraordinary slave narrative called [My Bondage and My Freedom](#), first published in 1855. He included, in the same volume, a series of six transcripts of speeches or orations that he had given as a campaigner against slavery.

Slavery was abolished in the USA in 1865 at the end of the US Civil War, ten years after the publication of Frederick Douglass's book.

These six particular lectures of Douglass's are contained in one of the two attached documents. "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?" is a famous one, but they are all outstanding. This was an orator!

Power concedes nothing without a demand

But the main reading, attached, is the most immortal of all of Frederick Douglass's speeches, known as "**If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress**" from 1857. It contains the famous sentence: "**Power concedes nothing without a demand.**" If you read nothing else of Douglass's, do read this extraordinary piece of revolutionary literature, for the good advice that it gives: *power concedes nothing without a demand*.

The American Civil War of 1861-1865 was an armed conflict between one part of the bourgeoisie and another. It represented the real capitalist revolution in the USA, when the specifically capitalist bourgeoisie gained its dictatorship over the slaveholding part, and also over the new proletariat that it had created. In this way the US capitalist-bourgeois dictatorship, that still exists today, came into being.

For Africans, the global abolition of slavery was a relief after more than three centuries of terrible mass-scale atrocity. But the abolition of outright slavery also marked the beginning of wage slavery, and of military invasions, conquests, domination,

plunder, settlement and colonialism, including a “scramble for Africa” in the second half of the 19th Century. In the second half of the 20th Century, globalist neo-colonialism followed.

African political writing tracked all of these changes. This week we look at the literature of the period of slavery and colonial expansion. In the next part, we will move into the literature of the post-WW2 era of decolonisation.

- The above serves to introduce the original reading-text - [Frederick Douglass's 1857 "If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress"](#)
- PDF files of the reading text are attached, including [six more lectures of Frederick Douglass](#)
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).